

The Second Humanist Revolution: Eco-Humanism

by
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Humanism is a philosophical and literary movement that changed the face of the world. Born in late fourteenth and early fifteenth century Italy as a protest against the dogmatic absolutism of mediaeval Catholicism, it quickly spread across Europe and created the intellectual conditions for the Renaissance, thus launching the modern age.

The Middle Ages saw the social order on earth as an imperfect replica of the order of Heaven – a hierarchy centred on God who had assigned, just as in heaven his angels and seraphim, everyone on earth his or her place on the ladder of social rank – from the king at the top to the poor, unlettered and bondaged peasants and labourers at the bottom. It was a static worldview, convenient and flattering to those enjoying power and privilege, but a life sentence of slavery for the majority of people.

This social structure was built on an equally confining doctrinaire intellectual base. The Fall of Adam and Eve, the Catholic Church taught, had so corrupted human senses and the human mind as to render them incapable of arriving at reliable, true insights into the nature of things without divine guidance. All knowledge and truth had their source in God and were therefore revelatory, not the fruit of human reason and observation.

But the human spirit will not, in the long run, be suppressed, and everything is in constant flux and must change. Every system of thought and action contains the seeds of its own transcendence. Behind the apparently rigid, dogmatic exterior of medieval Catholicism, forces were at work to undermine it. Theological disputes grappling with doctrinal contradictions eventually reasserted the ability of the human mind to discover truth by observation and thought, though only under the guidance and ultimate authority of the Church.

If the humanist revolution was thus prepared by the soul-searching debates within the fortress of medieval Faith, the humanist thinkers of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, who rose in revolt against the repressive dominance of the Church, nevertheless broke upon the scene with the force of a volcanic eruption. Their call was to the liberation of human beings and of the human spirit. They went back to the philosophers of antiquity and, after extricating their work from the misrepresentations of scholastic spin doctors, recovered from the classical Greek and Roman texts the ideas of human freedom, of the worth of the individual, of democratic government, and of scientific and intellectual inquiry after truth and the nature of things.

The consequences of this revolution in our ideas about ourselves and the world are difficult to exaggerate. It was as though a new and brilliant light had burst upon a gloomy darkness. Renaissance painting conveys a visceral sense of this startling illumination of the world. The light resounds with the cry for freedom – freedom from repression by dogma, by self-appointed authority, by the warlords of Church and State. Humanism set in motion the slow, tumultuous march towards democracy; it opened doors and windows to scientific inquiry and promoted the technological application of its insights; it liberated education from stifling traditions and established the study of the liberal arts as the true path to self-realization.

The arts took a dramatic turn away from the artificialities of myth, legend, and hagiography: the lives of real human beings became the subject for writers and painters. Chaucer's **Canterbury Tales** embodies the pilgrimage of the mind from a long winter to its rebirth in spring. Nor was it any accident that perspective in painting was a Renaissance innovation. True knowledge, true understanding, the humanists argued, depended on seeing objects, individuals, events, ideas in their proper time and place. Thus history was restored as an important component of the human quest. And finally, by rejecting the scriptural *Love of Money is the root of all Evil* (1 Timothy 6,10), and recognizing money not only as a necessary means of exchange but as a legitimate means of social advancement, the humanists even set the study and application of economics on course.

Humanism was not in its inception anti-religious. Most of the early humanist thinkers were devout Christians. But they opposed the tyranny of the Catholic Church and its interpretation of the Bible with its depressing doctrine of the world as a valley of tears and human life as a path of suffering to atone for some imagined original sin in hope of a better life in the hereafter. They insisted that God had endowed human beings with intelligence and a free will so that they should exercise them. Only later, when Protestantism with its obsessive puritanism proved itself as repressive as the Roman church, and it became clear that the God manifest in the Bible was irreconcilable with the world as it gradually revealed itself to the disciplined inquiry of the human mind, did humanism turn away from all forms of institutionalized religion.

Pico della Mirandola (1463 – 1494), in his **Oration on the Dignity of Man**, still puts what I consider to be the first Humanist Manifesto in the mouth of God:

I have given you, Adam, neither a predetermined place nor a particular aspect nor any special prerogatives in order that you may take and possess these through your own decision and choice. The limitations on the nature of other creatures are contained within my prescribed laws. You shall determine your own nature without restraint from any barrier, by means of the freedom to whose power I have entrusted you. I have placed you at the centre of the world so that from that point you might see better what is in the world. I have made you ... so that, like a free and sovereign artificer, you might mold and fashion yourself into that form you yourself shall have chosen.

This 'heretical' declaration must have struck the Europe of its time like a cannon shot in the middle of a Gregorian chant. With one stroke of the mind, God had been removed from the centre of the world and replaced by Man¹. The discovery of America and Copernicus' heliocentric system of the planets, Newton's laws of physics and Darwin's discovery of the evolutionary processes in nature, the works of Shakespeare, the Reformation, capitalism, democracy, communism, existentialism, atheism, feminism – all have their origin in this giant step that constitutes the first humanist revolution.

The shift from a God-centered to a Man-centered universe was a swing of the pendulum from one extreme to another. It was a necessary step in the history of our species, but like all extremes it was bound to end up undermining the very foundations of the new world order it set out to create. Everything implies its opposite and to the same extent. The conviction that

¹ I'm using the term Man in the sense in which the Renaissance meant it to be understood, namely as denoting human beings of both genders. I capitalize the word to remove it from its meaning as man=male. Perhaps we should add the German word "Mensch" to our vocabulary, like "Kindergarten" and "Zeitgeist", to enrich our language.

humanity is the creator of its own world – in effect, the deification of Man – has brought upon us a crisis of such catastrophic proportions that it now rivals the Cretaceous terminal cataclysm around 67 million years ago when all life forms weighing more than 25 kg became extinct and the rest was radically decimated. The current one, which is of our own making, has the potential of putting an end to the human species itself just as the Cretaceous extinction wiped out the dinosaur. The complete freedom we reached for has made us prisoners of our own technological achievements. It is time for the second humanist revolution to restore a larger perspective to our understanding of the world we inhabit and our place in it. Reason and its disciplined application to observation and experiment, on which we rest our case as humanists, demand no less of us.

John Gray, in **Straw Dogs** (London 2002), attacks humanists as merely the inheritors of the Christian belief in the superiority of human beings over all other forms of life and in their ability “to be masters of their own destiny”. This is a catchy opening to an otherwise insightful and challenging study of what it means to be human, but its attempt to dismiss humanism as just another form of anthropocentric religion is simplistic, erroneous, and ignorant of the diversity and complexity of modern humanist thought, an unfortunate exercise in shadow-boxing.²

However, such a misreading is inherent in the origins of humanism and in its name. After all, Pico della Mirandola does claim that we, unlike the *other creatures*, are *free and sovereign artificers* who *take and possess* our place in the world and fashion ourselves by our own *decision and choice ... without restraint from any barrier*. This is a secular restatement of the Christian view of the supremacy of Man, and I daresay many humanists still harbour such notions since a commitment to human self-determination by the power of reason is central to their philosophy. In the absence of any clear statement to the contrary, outsiders can therefore be forgiven if they see humanists in this anthropocentric light. The fact is that the rigorous rational pursuit of knowledge and truth which humanism itself launched has, ironically, brought us not full-, but half-circle around to a position that negates some of the original humanist assumptions, and we must now summon the courage to confront this second revolution in our ideas.

The seeds for the reversal of our view of humanity’s importance were inherent in our self-aggrandisement. As Pico della Mirandola placed Man *at the centre of the world*, the new astronomy removed the planet earth from the centre of the solar system and eventually the solar system far from any imaginable centre of the universe, thereby effectively undercutting any claim to human supremacy. From the beginning, the disinterested pursuit of the truth about the world we live in was at odds with the assumptions on which we based our scientific research. Inevitably the gap grew, and eventually it became unbridgeable. The turning point came in the nineteenth century with Darwin’s epoch-making work in evolutionary biology.

At first, the demonstration that Natural Selection had led to the emergence of the human species seemed to confirm the idea that *homo sapiens* constituted the pinnacle of the evolution of life, its supreme achievement. It took time for the implications of Darwin’s discoveries to be fully understood. Being the last to arrive on the scene doesn’t mean you’re the focus of the event. Far from supporting any notion of human supremacy in the order of nature, evolution clearly argued both the randomness and the transience of our appearance on this planet. Had the Cretaceous comet not cleared the decks for a luxuriant mammalian boom, we would not be here to talk about it. Changing habitats and adaptation to them, mutation and natural selection – these alone determine the coming and going of species. And since the laws that govern the operations of energy and mass guarantee constant changes in the environment, it is a foregone conclusion

² Cf. Henry Beissel, “In Defence of Humanism”, **HAC Newsletter**

that they will eventually create conditions that will replace human with some other animal kind. It is only a question of time.

So, ironically, at the same time Nietzsche declared the Christian idea of God dead, Darwin declared the Christian-Humanist idea of Man dead. His discoveries allowed for no teleological interpretations of the evolution of life. Instead, they proved that nothing necessitated the emergence of humanity and nothing would prevent its demise. With this blow to the human ego, an atmosphere of doom descended upon central Europe at the end of the nineteenth century. The anti-hero was born, and the two wars that devastated the twentieth century can be seen as a form of existential revolt, a desperate attempt to prove that the most powerful are the fittest and that the fittest survive. It took the killing of untold millions of human beings for the realization to begin to dawn that the path of power and pride leads into the abyss.

Today we are facing that abyss. The assumption that the world exists for our benefit has resulted in the devastation of the entire planet. The heedless pursuit of *our* pleasure, *our* comfort, *our* happiness, and *our* ceaseless gratification, regardless of *the other creatures*, is destroying the very conditions on which we depend for our survival. Our forests, the earth's lungs, are being brutally amputated by the axe and the chainsaw; our rivers and oceans are dying from industrial pollution which is spreading disease around the world; global warming is engendering increasingly extreme weather conditions producing catastrophic storms, floods, droughts, fires; the polar ice caps are melting and will put much of the civilized world under water within this century; the biosphere is undergoing a mass extinction – except for its human population which has reached six-and-a-half billion and is increasing by two hundred thousand every day; the majority of humans live in abject poverty now while a few acquire fairy-tale wealth, and the gulf between them continues to grow; the supply of oil necessary to meet vital energy needs has peaked and will soon dry up along with many other resources of the earth we have plundered to the point of exhaustion.

This (partial) catalogue of catastrophic developments is not the product of the raving mind of some pessimistic misanthrope. It is, quite on the contrary, based on research and reason, and lists the consequences of a heedless self-centred mega-optimism, an unprecedented human hubris. Almost daily, new studies are added to the growing literature bearing witness to the rapid and frightening degradation of our environment. For those who understand the implications, they add up to nothing less than the apocalypse. And time is running out. If we are to be spared a terrible final curtain to the human tragicomedy, we must, now and first of all, recognize that the impending disaster is of our own making. It is the logical conclusion to the history of a species that not only considers itself superior to all other creatures but thinks the world exists for its sole benefit, as its own private fiefdom, and that sees itself as nature's supreme achievement, glorious, free and immortal.

William R. Catton, Jr, in his study **Overshoot** (1980), shows that the suicidal course we are embarked on is common in nature. It is the inevitable fate of species an evolutionary fluke has endowed with some special quality that made them particularly successful in the struggle for survival. Their very success induces them to *overshoot* the limits of sustainable survival and deconstruct their habitat. In fact, their success is their undoing. That pattern ominously fits *homo sapiens*.

So, perhaps we are simply acting out the laws of nature. But our species is unique for its ability to think, to abstract and to make predictions. That, in turn, enables us to adjust our actions to bring about specific events or to prevent them from occurring. If, to take a hypothetical

example, we were to drastically reduce our burning of fossil fuels tomorrow, the earth's atmosphere might have a chance to recover and global warming would slow down, even come to a stop. This might preserve us from some of the disasters now approaching so alarmingly. In other words, we need not continue marching into self-destruction. We have, theoretically, the necessary level of awareness and the freedom of action to change course for a more sustainable future. To effect that change requires a second humanist revolution.

Just as the first humanist revolution removed God from the centre of the world and replaced him with Man, so we must now remove Man and replace him with Life itself. We must now apply the very perspective the Renaissance humanists recovered for the history of humankind to the history of life. What emerges is an intricate web that has evolved over billions of years. All creatures and species play their part in this infinitely interactive crosshatching of organisms, and none occupies any privileged position or serve any exalted purpose. Yes, humankind is special and unique, but so are bats and cockroaches. While they have developed their uniqueness to enjoy aeons of living on this planet, the unfoldment of our unique qualities has triggered a mass extinction of which we may well be the victims ourselves. If we manage to self-destruct in this or the next century, we may well hold the record for the most short-lived and most murderous creature on this planet ever. Our grandeur is solely the function of our own delusion that humanity is the measure of all things.

We must disabuse ourselves of such criminal vanity. Here is a mindgame that might help: imagine we could conduct a poll in which all creatures on land, in the sea and in the air were asked to choose one species of animal they would like to see disappear from the face of the earth – which species do you think would get the overwhelming vote? The embarrassed smile with which this proposition is usually received suggests that deep down we know how appallingly we have abused the privilege of the chance to live.

Having humbly accepted our place in the web of life, transitory as all other species and on an equal footing with them, no better than bats or cockroaches, the next step in the second humanist revolution is to act accordingly. That means to act in a manner that will not inflict injury, suffering or death unnecessarily on any of the creatures with whom we share the planet, but instead to act to maintain and foster the well-being and diversity of the web of life. The practical implications of such a commitment call for nothing less than a complete reorientation of our individual lives and a complete overhaul of our social institutions and their activities.

If we are to survive the current global crisis, we must all become eco-humanists, i.e. we must act in the interests not just of ourselves and our neighbours, but also those of all fellow humans on the planet, and indeed of all fellow creatures. Even that is not enough. We must act to protect and enhance not only today's web of life but tomorrow's as well. Nietzsche enriched our catalogue of virtues by one he called *Fernstenliebe*, 'love of those far away' – far away in space and time. He contrasted it with Christian *Nächstenliebe*, 'love of those next to you (i.e. your neighbours)' which he considered to be ultimately a form of egotism since it was motivated by the expectation of the same neighbourly treatment ("*Love thy neighbour as thyself*"). *Fernstenliebe* calls for a love of the future, of the generations of human and nonhuman creatures to come, who cannot repay us. The only benefit to the practitioners of this virtue is that they fulfill their uniqueness as human beings by understanding the world of which they are an inextricable part, accepting their place, and acting accordingly. If life is to have any meaning at all, surely it has to be for each creature to bring to utmost expression its own unique characteristics within the limits nature has staked out for us all.

Eco-humanism is the next logical step in the evolution of human mind. What that entails in practical terms is so radical and all-encompassing. We must learn to content ourselves with a more modest mode of living, reduce our expectations and demands on the world around us. This involves learning to enjoy who we are rather than revel in what we possess.

We must cut back the burning of fossil fuels and the rape of the earth's resources dramatically. Lowering population levels will help; so will alternative, sustainable sources of energy, but these can never satisfy our current energy needs. We must lower our energy demands, restrain our insatiable appetite for travel, forego some of our excessive indulgences in energy-guzzling luxuries. What we need is sustainable *retrenchment* instead of sustainable *development*. Either we commit to it voluntarily or it will soon be forced upon us.

We must also take back the power and the right to govern our own lives by creating truly democratic administrations in place of the governments that now primarily serve the financial interests of corporations. We must eliminate poverty and establish a more equitable, more just distribution of the earth's bounty.

It all starts with education – true education. Today's educational institutions have become vocational training centres. Of course we need engineers, doctors, mechanics, nurses, etcetera, and they must be trained. But education is more than acquiring skills for a well-paying job. It is a journey of the mind that should take us through the history not only of our own species but of life itself and indeed of the cosmos. It is a permanent quest for understanding and knowledge, and cherishes above all else beauty and truth. It must not only train our reasoning faculties, but also, and more importantly, nurture and refine our emotions and our imagination. Only the mature interaction of these three human faculties can guide us towards peace, fulfillment and happiness.

The first humanists understood that a true education must focus on the Liberal Arts. The values by which we choose to live our lives are motivated by our emotions and conceived in the imagination; reason supplies the tool with which to implement them. Poetry, music, painting, fiction, along with history and philosophy – these are the tutors and custodians of the imagination and of our emotions. Thus eco-humanism reaffirms the principles that launched the first humanist revolution. Our children need to be exposed to and instructed in them from the start, not as some subsidiary activity but as part of the mainstay of their educational experience. Only on that path will they acquire the humility, compassion and understanding that form the foundation for any possible restoration of the web of life on our planet that will include a viable future for the human species along with the other fellow-creatures.

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